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***NHÀ TRỢ*, RENTAL ROOMS FOR FRAGMENTS OF LIFE.
TEMPORARY FOOTPRINT OF RURAL MIGRANTS IN
HO CHI MINH CITY***

Clara Jullien

Abstract. In Ho Chi Minh City, private complexes of rental rooms designated in Vietnamese as *nhà trọ* form one of the cheapest housing stocks, targeting the working-class, including internal rural migrants. This article combines the insights of both migration and urban studies to analyze the occupation of the *nhà trọ* through the concept of temporariness. It addresses the tensions between present constraints and long-term plans of rural migrants as well as their translation into the occupation of the urban space. The method draws upon observations of rental housing and interviews conducted in two suburban neighborhoods of Ho Chi Minh City in 2020 and 2021, with migrants coming from deltaic and coastal rural areas of Vietnam. It is found that the *nhà trọ* provide housing for rural migrants who are in a long-term temporary situation, within a tight urban fabric with scarce opportunities for access to urban land ownership. Informants have moved to the city up to thirty years ago. Both the move and the duration are explained by multiple factors, from economic and social mutations to environmental pressures on the deltas and the coast. Relative job stability and trust-based interpersonal relationships in the city may strengthen over time, encouraging migrants to stay. Nevertheless, no matter how long they remain in Ho Chi Minh City, many migrants perceive their stay as temporary before a projected return to the hometown, where their permanent residence registration remains. The occupation of the *nhà trọ* observed, their adaptations, and the narratives of migrants reveal the relative nature of temporariness in migration and draw the contours of the spatial footprint of low-skilled rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City.

Keywords: temporariness, migration temporality, internal migration, rural-to-urban migration, housing, low-income housing, Ho Chi Minh City, *nhà trọ*.

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Introduction

Moving behind the streets and alleys of Ho Chi Minh City and entering the private plots of land, one encounters a network of narrow paths. Bordered by invariably identical iron doors, they give access to private rooms organized in ranges. From the main street or alley, these invisible rooms are indicated by board signs saying “*phòng cho thuê*”: “room for rent”. These blocks of rental accommodations built on private land are designated as *nhà trọ*, each rental room being a *phòng trọ*. They compose one of the cheapest housing stocks of Ho Chi Minh City, targeting the working-class, particularly rural migrants.

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In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City and its industrial neighbor, Binh Duong province, attract the majority of the internal migration flows, with in-migration rates of 9.1% and 21.7% respectively in 2019 according to the last national census [GSO 2020: 829]¹. By contrast, rural provinces in the Mekong Delta region and in the North Central and Central Coast region see their population leaving without much in-migration to balance this trend. In 2019, they had the largest negative net migration rates of the country (-4% and -2.5% respectively) [Ibid.]. To a lesser extent, some rural provinces of the Red River Delta also experience large negative out-migration rates. These numbers are evidence of migration corridors towards Ho Chi Minh City that appeared in the early 1990s (Fig. 1). Li demonstrated how, by that time, the softening of restrictions on mobility and the development of transportation simplified migration, while the increase in agricultural productivity was depriving more and more farmers of their jobs [Li 1996: 4]. These migration flows end up in the rental rooms of Ho Chi Minh City.

Thirty years of continuous migration raise the question of the temporality and the materiality of these trajectories. Since early occurrences in the 1970s, time has become a major feature of geography, in particular migration studies [Ho 2021: 1]. The same way the spatial turn hit social sciences, the temporal turn hit spatial studies. “The Times of Migration” by Cwerner in 2001 set the first stone of a holistic temporal analysis of migration, followed by literature shedding light on the multiplicity of migration temporalities [Collins 2017; Shubin, 2015]. In particular, McGarrigle and Ascensao, following Ingolds, distinguished biographical/historical time from everyday time, as “in present, in-between and suspended time” [McGarrigle, Ascensao 2017: 79]. This distinction provides some framing to introduce the concept of temporariness. In migration studies, it refers to a temporary state within a migration trajectory, emerging from the legal and political dimensions of migration [Goldring 2014: 219; Robertson 2015: 3], and impacting social inclusion [Basok, George 2020: 3]. It is not defined by a specific length [Wallman 2017: 12.11.2021], but rather by “different degrees” [King 2002: 93], which brings Bailey et al. to talk about a state of “permanent temporariness” [Bailey et al. 2002: 138]. The spatialization of temporariness has been studied in refugee camps [Steigemann, Misselwitz 2020: 1] and at the city scale [Collins 2011: 320]. Besides, the concept of temporariness has proved to be operational in answering the challenges of urban development and post-crisis management [Moatasim 2018: 13; Félix et al. 2015; Tardiveau, Mallo 2014].

Despite the conceptualization of time in migration being developed mostly in international migration studies, a renewed curiosity for the temporality of internal migration is rising, in particular regarding environment-related migration [Kabir et al. 2018] and public space use [Tan 2020]. Vietnam is no exception, and studies on internal migration have already mentioned some aspects of temporality. Several works decoded the legal temporary status of rural migrants in Vietnamese cities [Nguyen Thi Thieng, Luu Bich Ngoc 2016: 162; Gibert 2014: 226; Pulliat 2013: 94]. The topic of temporality has also been discussed regarding return mobility [Agergaard, Vu Thi Thao 2011: 418] and return migration [Nguyen Loc Duc et al. 2017: 2]. Finally, considering time perception, Lainez proposed a reflection over the “regime of present-ness” that characterizes the temporalities of precarious and marginal sex workers in the Mekong Delta, including migrants [Lainez 2018: 3]. In

¹ The in-migration and out-migration rates of a territorial unit reflect the number of people from other territorial units who immigrate to and emigrate from that territorial unit in proportion to the population of that territorial unit. These numbers include only official internal migrants, defined as residents of a specific administrative unit, who lived in a different administrative unit five years earlier, and aged 5 or older at the time of census enumeration [GSO, UNFPA 2010: 75]. The actual share of migrants in the population of Ho Chi Minh City is likely to be higher.

parallel, studies have used time as the main interpretation grid of the Vietnamese city. Harms offered an analysis of the temporality of eviction [Harms 2013] while Gibert-Flutre developed a methodology to address the rhythm of the city emerging from the everyday time of individuals [Gibert-Flutre 2021].

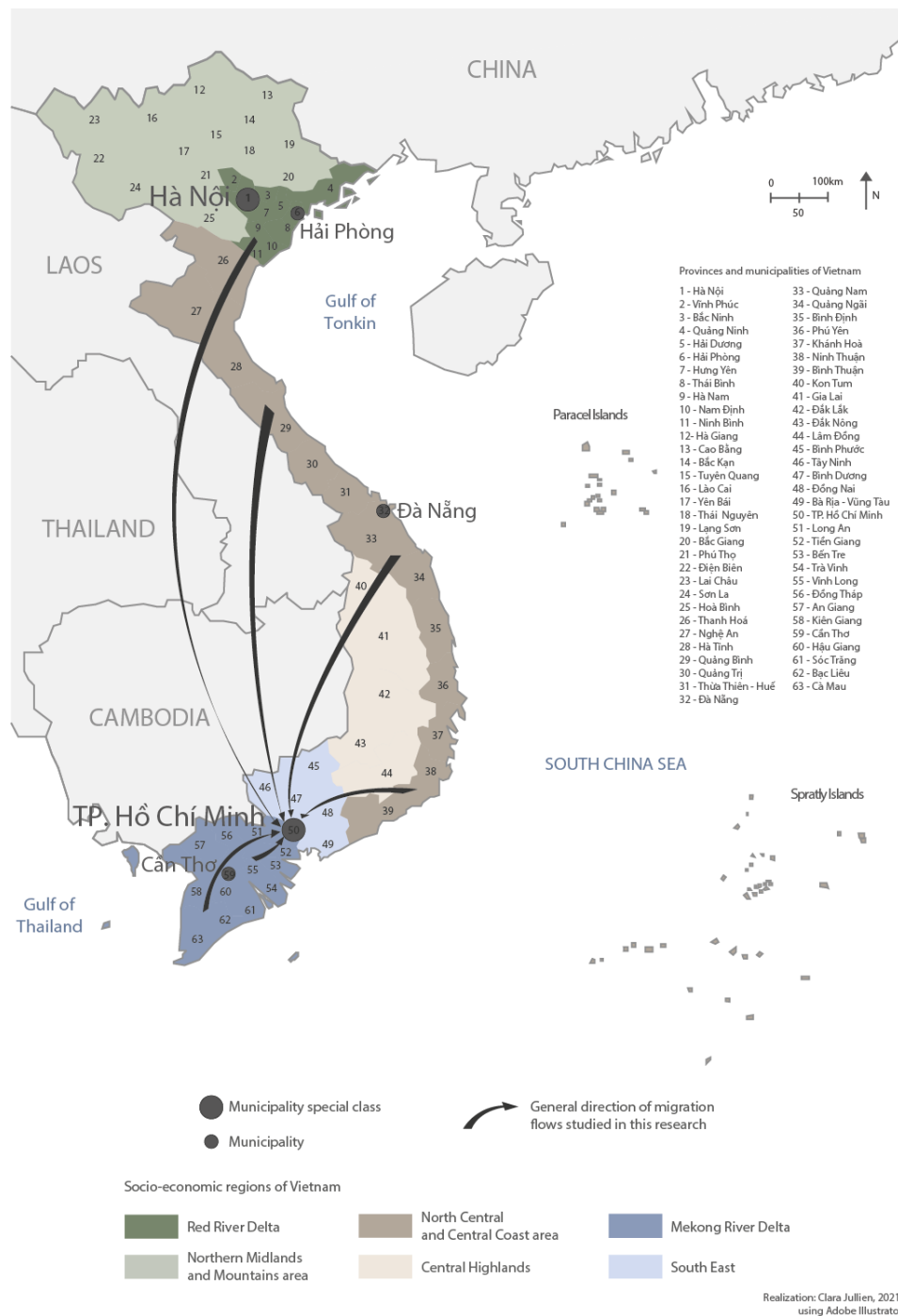


Fig.1. Contemporary migration flows from deltaic and coastal areas of Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh City studied in this research.

Map by the author, 2021, made with Adobe Illustrator

This article falls within the continuity of this literature on temporality. A gap remains to be filled by developing a time perspective at the junction between migration studies and urban studies in a Vietnamese context. The author studies the case of internal rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City

from a spatial and temporal perspective, with a focus on housing practices, at the core of their footprint in the urban area. The author builds on the concept of temporariness to analyze the rental rooms' development and occupation. Behind the doors of the *nhà trọ*, the daily routines and struggles of the migrants collide with long-term family trajectories. Many may stay in Ho Chi Minh City for several years, up to several decades. In doing so, they turn the *nhà trọ* into long-term accommodations. How does the combination of present constraints and long-term plans translate into the rural migrants' occupation of urban space? Confronting biographical time and everyday time, the author questions the time of presence of rural migrants in the city and its translation into the urban fabric.

This article draws upon observations of rental housing and a corpus of qualitative interviews conducted with around 80 rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City between June 2020 and May 2021. The informants came mostly from the Mekong Delta, the central coast of the country, and the Red River Delta. The life story interviews aimed at redrawing their personal migration paths. This fieldwork has been conducted in the framework of a PhD research focusing on the migration trajectories of rural migrants from coastal and deltaic areas of Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh City, in a context of environmental changes. This preliminary article is based on the first phase of the research. The data processing is still in progress.

The research was conducted on two sites located in the western periphery of Ho Chi Minh City, in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts (Fig. 2). Go Vap district experienced its fastest development during the 1990s and the 2000s, and remains an attractive area today, with a high density of population (35,000 hab/km² in 2019) [PSO HCMC 2019: 47]. Binh Tan district has grown more recently, making it the most populated district of Ho Chi Minh City in 2019 with a relatively lower density (15,000 hab/km² in 2019) [Ibid.]. Go Vap district has a mixed economy including a growing service sector and industries, which employ thousands of rural migrants living in *nhà trọ*. It also attracts Ho Chi Minh City residents seeking for properties, and investors developing high-standard residential projects. By contrast, the economic profile of the area studied in Binh Tan district is more homogeneous, with big industrial sites, and a large number of *nhà trọ*.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, the author describes the *nhà trọ* housing stock and how it fits into the overall housing market of Ho Chi Minh City as an accessible housing option for rural migrants. Then, the author discusses how the *nhà trọ* turn into long-term accommodations.

***Nhà trọ*, housing stock accessible to rural migrants**

The *nhà trọ* occupied by rural migrants are characterized by their affordability, simplicity and informality, which theoretically position them towards the short-term side of the housing spectrum. They compose the main housing stock occupied by the migrants in the studied areas. They are standardized, concrete, private rental rooms distributed along ranges: usually between 8 and 15 m², sometimes adding a mezzanine floor, most of the time with very little light, ventilation and soundproofing. Most of the housing visited include a tiny and basic private bathroom. The cheapest

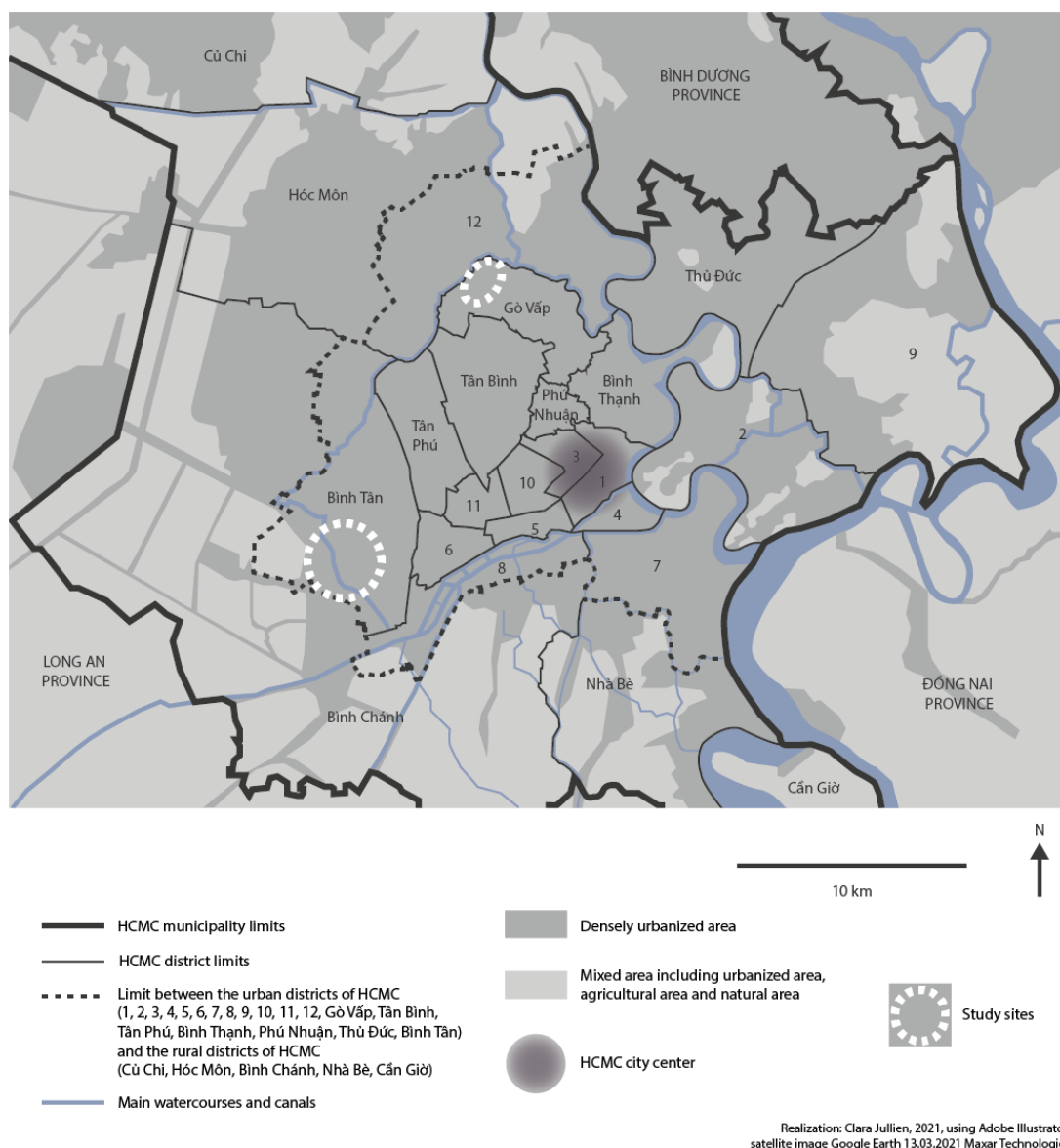


Fig. 2. Location of the study sites in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, Ho Chi Minh City.

Map by the author, 2021, made with Adobe Illustrator, satellite image Google Earth 13.03.2021

ones share a communal bathroom outside. Rooms do not include any furniture or equipment initially. Given the situation of many rooms at ground level and the poor quality of construction materials, considering the growing flood risk in Ho Chi Minh City, the likelihood of flooding is concerning. Basic adaptation tactics to flooding are observed, such as putting plastic tarp on the door during rainy season (Fig.3). Based on the classification of the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the rental rooms enter the category of semi-permanent housing, in particular due to the composition of the roof often made of steel sheets [UN-Habitat 2014: 44].



Fig. 3. Ranges of rental rooms in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City. *Photo by the author, June 2020*

Tenants rent the rooms on a monthly basis. For the *nhà trọ* observed in the study sites, the rental price is usually set between VND 0.9 and 2.5 million (around USD 40–110), depending on the standard of the room. A few bigger and more expensive rooms have been found. Comfort criteria include surface area, natural light, condition, and location. Housing located in a street is more expensive than housing in an alley. Electricity and water fees are to be added, based on the rate applied to this specific housing and the consumption of the tenants, totaling a few hundred thousand Vietnamese dong. The amount dedicated to housing usually ranges from VND 1 to 3 million (USD 45–135), so that it fits into the budget of the informants who commonly earn between VND 4 and 8 million per person per month (USD 175–355). On the study sites, the most common cases of cohabitation are married couples, often with children, sometimes two roommates, and rarely one single tenant.

Besides the *nhà trọ*, cheaper accommodations are accessible to rural migrants, all of them designed to be temporary. Many factories offer full-board dormitories for a very low rent. Dorms, however, are not accessible to couples; therefore, they might be an option for single migrants when they first arrive, before migrant couples move to a *phòng trọ* in the next step of a longer housing path. Construction workers often stay in temporary shelters on the construction sites. Migrants can also rent a place in a shared room with others, ten or more people, on a nightly basis, for a very cheap rent. Finally, some migrants squat in abandoned buildings for free, like two ladies interviewed. Dorms, shelters, shared rooms and squats all belong to the realm of temporariness.

Currently, the *nhà trọ* housing stock provides a major supply of accessible housing in Ho Chi Minh City, not only for rural migrants but for the urban working class in general, and for anyone in need of a temporary solution. These rental rooms are common all across Ho Chi Minh City and exist

in a wide range of standings and prices. Vietnamese cities suffer from an insufficient stock of decent small size housing accessible to low-income households [Waibel et al. 2007], especially since social housing is very limited [The World Bank, IBRD 2020: 85; Quertamp et al. 2014: 89]. According to the national census of 2019, only 21.1% of households in urban areas were renting their accommodation nationwide, and 33.8% of households in urban areas in Ho Chi Minh City [GSO 2020: 634]. But, compared to twenty or thirty years ago, Ho Chi Minh City's housing market prices make it challenging to access ownership in the city. The attractiveness of the city and the scarcity of land available have led to an on-going increase in land prices, strengthened by speculation mechanisms. The speculation of investors over transactions of properties deprived of full title generated a “bubble” in Ho Chi Minh City's housing market [Truong Thien Thu, Perera 2011: 134]. In this context, for low-skilled rural migrants, the perspective of securing permanent access to land in the city remains scarce². In areas such as Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, which used to be the margins of the city, land owners saw the opportunity to make a profit from their plot of land, especially after their classification switched from rural to urban, while meeting the constantly growing demand for cheap housing. The *nhà trọ* are part of the vast informal self-built housing stock of Ho Chi Minh City, along with owner-occupied family residences [UN-Habitat 2014: 51]. Over the past decade, the Vietnamese government has committed to develop housing programs for industrial sector workers and students, and social housing for low-income households in order to fill the gap of the housing market³. However, for now, the *nhà trọ* stands out as one of the most affordable housing solutions.

The lack of affordability of Ho Chi Minh City's real estate market goes hand in hand with the difficulties in meeting the legal conditions to access urban residence. In Vietnam, the *hộ khẩu*, or residence certificate, links each household to its location of residence. As shown by previous research, until recently, the requirements to change the residence registration were difficult to meet, especially when moving to centrally-administered cities [La Hai Anh et al. 2019: 214; The World Bank, VASS 2016: 5; Pulliat 2016: 12.11.2021]. The recent Law on Residence of 2020, in application since the 1st of July 2021, has simplified the residence registration process and abolished the special conditions to access permanent residence in centrally-administered cities, including Ho Chi Minh City [Law on Residence 2020, 20]. In addition, it is possible to obtain a permanent residence registration while renting a housing, if the tenant gets the agreement of the landlord. However, the Law stipulates that, in order to be a permanent residence, a housing must offer a minimum of 8 m² of floor per person [Law on Residence 2020, 20.3.b]. The current occupation of several rooms observed do not meet the conditions of permanent residence.

Moreover, changing the permanent residence means renouncing the land use rights to the rural land, hence, it is not necessarily advantageous for rural migrants [Pulliat 2013: 95]. Temporary residence registrations have been created to provide rural migrants with a registration status in the city [Liu, Dang Duc Anh 2019: 4–5]. The vast majority of the migrants interviewed in this study stay in the city with a temporary residence registration, *tạm trú*, and keep their *hộ khẩu* in the hometown. They describe the administrative process of the temporary registration as simple since it is handled by the landlord of the housing and only requires the migrant's identification card. Restricted access

² This study does not encompass high-skilled migration.

³ PM Decision No. 66/2009/QĐ-TTg; Govt. Decree 188/2013/NĐ-CP, Circular 08/2014/TT-BXD from the Ministry of Construction, Housing Law of 2014 No. 24/2014/L-CTN; Govt. Decrees 99/2015/ND-CP; 100/2015/ND-CP; and 49/2021/ND-CP.

to the public education system happens to be one of the main drags that the absence of permanent urban registration puts on migrants' households, as the priority is given to parents with urban residence. When time comes to register their children for school, migrants can apply for a long-term temporary registration (KT3). In practice, on the study sites in Ho Chi Minh City, not having a permanent registration in the city does not limit the duration of presence in the city, nor the access to the housing market or to the private low-skilled job market. In that context, the *nhà trọ* provides an affordable option to the *tạm trú* holders, newcomers in the city as well as long-arrived migrants.

When the temporary drags on

By the time of the interviews, informants had been staying in Ho Chi Minh City for between three months and thirty years, renting their place sometimes for more than ten years. A wide range of economic, social, legal and environmental factors converged in the decision to move. The same set of factors is at play in the decision to stay for decades in Ho Chi Minh City. Due to the agricultural transition and the "green revolution", the farming sector requires less labor. The market prices have become more volatile and the competition with agribusinesses has been growing. At the same time, the promotion and generalization of urban lifestyles contribute to new and higher expectations. We observe a shift turning younger rural generations away from farming activity, like Quy⁴, a woman in her twenties, a factory worker coming from Quang Nam province in the Center. When asked why she decided to stay in the city she answered:

"It is easier to find a job here. Back in my hometown, there are very few companies, mostly farming. Whereas here, there are many jobs for me to choose from."

In addition, environmental conditions like salinization, erosion, drought, heavy floods and typhoons put pressure on deltaic and coastal areas [Tran Thuc et al. 2016]. The limitation of farming incomes, the repetition of storms or droughts, the perspective of long-lasting consequences of salinization, appear less and less bearable when put in perspective with modern expectations, and the possibility of staying in the city. When asked about it, Hong, a 31-year-old factory worker who moved from a fishing village in Khanh Hoa province and married a man from Quang Nam province, expressed her fear of storms, preventing her from coming back.

"It is easier to live in the city now because of the climate, there are no storms like in the countryside. [...] There are even more storms in my husband's hometown than in mine. [...] I... don't dare to go back, I just think about it."

Thanh, a 37-year-old mototaxi driver from Ben Tre province who arrived ten years ago, explained that the lack of drinkable water due to salinization makes it difficult to raise cows. In addition, he was unfamiliar with the use of farming machines. Salinization, mechanization, and an insufficient land surface led him to confess:

"Now, if I want to go back to live there, I don't know what to do anymore. It has been too long, I don't have the strength to do farming anymore, and I also don't know how to do it."

As time goes by in the city, trust-based interpersonal arrangements, horizontal relations between migrants and vertical relations between migrants and landlords, *chủ nhà*, might sustain a form of solidarity. Tenants might support each other through occasional loans or services, as they might do with colleagues. In one *nhà trọ*, one tenant was working as a nanny for the children of other tenants. The landlord, who sets the rules of life in the *nhà trọ*, and, in some cases, lives in a house on the same plot of land as the *nhà trọ*, might agree to loan money, to receive rent with a delay, to reduce

⁴ All the informants' names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

the rent or to provide basic food supplies in times of need, like during the Covid-19 pandemic. These informal transactions, included in a broader informal system of capital circulation, establish bonds between people [Pannier, Pulliat 2016: 116], financial bonds as well as personal ones. Meanwhile, for migrants working in the industrial sector, salaries increase yearly making it disadvantageous to quit the company. In these conditions, over the years, the *phòng trọ* can be personalized and adapted to a relatively higher standard of comfort when the financial conditions allow it. Hence, some *phòng trọ* have been decorated and gradually equipped by their tenants to include storage furniture, desk, TV, fridge, fan or AC (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A rental room occupied for 12 years by a married couple and their 11-year-old daughter, in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City. *Photo by the author, June 2020*

However, the situations are very diverse and cases of relative improvement of the living conditions in the city do not preclude other cases of long-term precarity and isolation (Fig. 5). One landlady warned us of less caring landlords. Plus, according to some interviewees, the support in the city remains limited in comparison with the hometown.

On that note, time and space constraints might not be inconsequential for social relations. The extensive working schedules of the migrants do not leave much time for socializing, and the design of the *nhà trọ* does not offer much space for gathering. Only in one *nhà trọ* observed, the landlady built an outside sitting area.



Fig. 5. A rental room occupied for 10 years by an elderly couple in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City.

Photo by the author, August 2020

Finally, for many migrants interviewed the mindset of temporariness remains when the mind stays in the hometown. Although most migrants encountered in Ho Chi Minh City only visit their hometown once a year, the connection remains. In addition to regular contacts with relatives, savings are often (not always) sent back to the hometown, whether for aging parents or children attending school. They are likely to be invested in land and housing in the hometown. Indeed, many migrants encountered still plan to return to their hometown when they get older and their physical condition does not allow them to keep up with the work in the city. That is the case of Mai, a lady of 58 years coming from Vinh Phuc province in the Red River Delta, who had been collecting recyclable trash for ten years in Ho Chi Minh City. At the time of the first interview in August 2020, she was considering going back soon, and she went back permanently in March the next year. This will to go back has been expressed by long-arrived migrants as well as newcomers. Tri, a mototaxi driver in his late thirties arrived from Vinh Long province in the Mekong Delta twenty years ago. He was sure he would go home **“because in his hometown... [he had] a house”**. Similarly, Minh, a 53-year-old mototaxi driver from Tien Giang province in the Mekong Delta, who arrived in Ho Chi Minh City only three months before the interview, was equally sure he would go back because **“everyone has to go home”**. The projection of many informants into a future return to the hometown invites us to step aside from viewing their present from the perspective of the “ideal state of full integration” (Çaglar 2016: 958).

But for some, their economic situation makes it inconceivable to go back, like for Xuan, a factory worker in her mid-twenties, pregnant and with one child, who arrived at only 13 years old from Thua Thien Hue province:

“The thought of living here for a long time is... well, I'm used to it, but life... I also want to go back to my hometown to be comfortable, but I don't have money, my house. As a worker, I don't have enough money to buy a house or anything.”

This impossibility is relative to the aspirations the migrants have for themselves or for their children. Duc, a mototaxi driver in his thirties, who left his spouse and his two children in Binh Thuan province on the South-East coast, was eager to be reunited with them. But he was staying alone in Ho Chi Minh City to sustain them and fund the education of his children, as he couldn't afford them staying and studying in the city. Talking about being in Ho Chi Minh City, he shared:

“Now I just want to be close to my children, why would I be here? [...] Here it is only a temporary solution.”

Finally, other informants value the life in the city better and would rather stay. This is the case of My, a 33-year-old woman working in a textile factory, the sister of Hong. To provide her children with a good environment, she chose to stay with her husband, her two young children and her mother in one of the highest standard *phòng trọ* observed on the study sites, next to her siblings. But her perspective has changed since she became a mother. With two children, the financial pressure, especially during the pandemic, led My to confess:

“I prefer to live in Saigon, but now that I see that, I feel like I might have to go back to live in the hometown.”

Conclusion

In this paper the author analyzed rural-to-urban migration through the lens of temporariness and its translation into space. The mismatch between the initial design and the actual occupation of the *nhà trọ*, their adaptations over time, reveal the complexity of the temporalities of migration, as well as the intricacy of time and space dimensions in migration. The temporal interpretative grid sheds light on the blurriness between temporary and permanent, rarely emphasized in internal migration studies. The migration trajectories transform the rented rooms from simple shells into accommodations hosting fragments of life. Behind their doors, rural migrants live in a long-term temporary situation. They intend for the situation to be temporary, nevertheless it may last indeterminately. Today, the Covid-19 pandemic highlights how quickly the balance low-skilled rural migrants build in the city can shift. The factories in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, as in other areas of Ho Chi Minh City, have been dismissing employees and reducing working schedules since the first quarter of 2020. In addition, the social distancing measures and lockdowns have put the livelihoods of the urban working class at risk. But even if the migration can be temporary, the concrete stays. Local media reported massive flows of rural migrants coming back to their hometowns, leaving the *nhà trọ* empty for now.

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